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# VARD MAMIKONIAN

PROF. NICHOLAS ADONTZ

Vard Mamikonian, the brother of Empress Theodora, was a leading personality of the Byzantine Empire and an illustrious figure of history, and one can only wonder that history has been so unjust and so ungrateful to him in trying to tarnish the luster of such a great statesman.

Vard fell by a traitor's sword at the very moment when he had reached the pinnacle of his glory and the imperial purple was almost within his grasp. Emperor Michael had no son and Vard had been promoted to the rank of Caesar, making him the logical candidate for the imperial succession. However, the fluctuations of political life on the banks of the Bosphorus were as impermanent in those days as the currents of a stormy sea which, in the twinkling of an eye, are shattered by malvolent winds.

Vard was a scion of the Mamikonians who had carved his path for him with the sword. After the death of Emperor Theophilus his wife Theodora had taken over the helm of the empire. The crown prince Michael was still a three year old infant at the time, and his mother Theodora was his real guardian. Her first minister of state and right hand man was the Eunuch Theoctist. In 856 when Michael was 18, he felt old enough to become the sole ruler.

Taking advantage of his nephew's ambitious inclinations, Vard further inflamed his passions and urged him to put an end

to the guardianship through a decisive step. The all-powerful Eunuch, Logothete Theoctist was put to the sword, Theodora's reign came to an end, and Michael replaced Theoctist with his Uncle Vard who now became Logothete and Chancellor of the Empire. Later Vard resigned the post of Logothete in favor of his son-in-law Sumbat. As it appears, Vard also assumed the command of the imperial cavalry. Theodora, under the circumstances, did not disdain to conspire against her brother by collaborating with the Emperor's Protostrator. After the abortive attempt on his life Michael rewarded Vard by promoting him to the rank of Imperial Caesar, and by the same token, he bestowed the protostratorate on Basil the Armenian, the man who was destined to clip the wings of Vard Mamikonian.

Vard already was Caesar when Michael wanted to test his military prowess on the battlefield and, with his leadership, marched against the Arabs. The imperial armies advanced as far as the banks of the Euphrates and laid siege to the City of Samosat. After a siege of three days, one Sunday when the Emperor was worshipping in the church, the Arabs opened the gates of the citadel and swooped upon the enemy, putting the Imperial army to flight. Michael barely escaped with his life, abandoning his tent and its furniture to the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

Two years later, Omar the Emir again

invaded the empire with a formidable army. Having assembled the forces from the Thracian, Macedonian and Asiatic themes totaling 40,000, Vard advanced against the enemy. The Emir of Melitene was advancing on the region of the seaport Samson by way of Sebastia. To intercept him, Vard camped near Dazimon (now Tokat), in a plain called Cellareon. Before long, Omar's army arrived on the scene and took a position at a place called Khonarion near the City of Zela, a little to the west of Dazimon, thus cutting off the road to retreat, and jeopardizing the position of the Imperial army.

After the first clash the Emperor retreated some six miles and, suffering from the heat of the day, ascended the neighboring hill of Anzes (or Anzen). The Emir's troops immediately surrounded the hill, endangering the life of the Emperor. This was the same spot where Michael's father Theophilus, in his invasion of 838, had fallen into the same trap and had been saved by the valor of General Manuel. And, curiously enough, Michael's liberator now was the same Manuel.

Michael, in his desperation, called to Manuel: "O Manuel, what shall we do now? We are lost."

And the Armenian General replied: "My Lord, take off your Imperial purple which betrays your person and put on this black. Take off your armor. I will pick a company of 500 of the braves and they'll cut off a path for us through the enemy lines. That way we shall be saved."

"What about my army?" the Emperor asked.

"Your Imperial Highness," Manuel replied, "must be saved at all cost. You must never fall captive into enemy hands. Should such a calamity happen, woe to Christendom. As to the army, we will do what we

can, the rest is in God's hands."

Manuel picked 500, from the cream of his army, and concentrated on a single spot. With shouts of "The Cross is victorious" his company pierced the enemy ring and emerged unscathed. Great was his surprise, however, when Manuel saw that the Emperor was not with the company. He had remained behind from fear. The devoted General was obliged to make an about face, and making a shambles of the enemy right and left, rejoined the Emperor. This time the effort was successful. Meanwhile the Arabs were suffering from the lack of water and grass for their horses and they had retreated to the neighboring meadow of Dora, allowing the Emperor to escape unmolested.

Two years passed and Omar, the stubborn Emir, with an army of 40,000 invaded the Armeniakon Theme, as far as the coast of Amisos (Samson). Here, incensed at the sea, like Xerxes of old, he ordered his men to lash the waters for having obstructed his advance.

Informed of this fresh invasion of his old antagonist, Michael moaned: "Woe is me. Is there no one who, for the sake of our Empire and for Christianity, will march against this infidel and wipe him off?"

Thereupon came forward the Armenian General Petron, the brother of the Empress, and said: "My Lord, God has given your Imperial Lordship many loyal subjects who love you and who are willing to die for you. The war, perforce, is now successful and now disastrous. No one can predict that the outcome will be victorious except God."

The Emperor replied: "Go, Petron, and meet the enemy. Endanger your life for the sake of my empire and for Christianity."

"I am ready, my Emperor, to shed my last drop of blood for your kingdom and your coreligionists," Petron replied.

The Emperor took heart and immediately appointed Petron Domestik of the Schola's — Commander-in-chief of the Imperial army. It was Petron's plan to pick a select

<sup>1</sup> *Genesius*, 91; *Theophanes Continuatus*, 176, Bonn.

small force and to fall on the enemy with such impetuosity as to finish him off in one blow. However, a deserter Roman warned the Emir that Petron was advancing on him with a large force.

The Emir's counsellors advised him to make a strategic retreat and give Petron battle only when forced. But the Emir repelled the idea as cowardly and immediately moved his army to Poson (or Posonta) on the frontier of Paphlagonia or the Armeniakon Theme.

The site of Poson is not known. According to the historian it is 500 miles from Amisos, which is wrong, or at least is in contradiction with his placing it on the frontier of Paphlaconia. We know this much that Poson is on the left bank of the Halys River.

Petron's army was camped at this very spot and the two armies were separated by a lone hill. In a night raid Petron seized the hill and entrenched his army. This move determined the issue of the fight. In the ensuing battle the Arabs met with a shattering defeat, the Emir was killed, and his son, in his attempt to escape, was captured by one Makhoras, the Chief of the Kharsian Theme, who delivered him to Petron.<sup>2</sup>

The Arabs had never sustained such a slaughter. The victory was decisive, the result of Petron's strategy. Contrary to his original plan, Petron assembled practically all the contingents of the Armeniakian, Pukellarian, Colonian and Paphlagonian themes which cut off the northern route to retreat. The contingents of Anatolia, Opsik, Cappadocea, Seleucia and Kharsian took care of the south, while the Imperial army and the Thracian and Macedonian forces, under the command of Petron himself closed up the western exit. The east was guarded by the River Halys. Thus the Arabs were caught in an iron ring. Like a trapped animal Omar was looking for a way to escape. Unable to pierce the iron ring, the proud

Emir fell sword in hand and his son was taken prisoner.

During the reign of Vard there were three invasions against the Arabs and the historians seem to have confused both the sequence and the personnel of the events. Despite this confusion, however, the historian's testimony is significant as regards the idea that Vard was promoted to the rank of Caesar because of his services in battle. What were those services? We have a right to presume that the reference belongs to the Battle of Dazimon where Michael's life hung from a thread. There can be no doubt that the man who saved Michael's life was not Manuel, but Vard. It was for this very service that the Armenian General merited the honor of the Imperial succession, by being appointed Caesar, the successor of sonless Michael.

Mudavakil the warlike Sultan died in the latter part of 861 and is not unlikely that the Emperor, taking advantage of the confusion in Baghdad, declared war on the Amirate the first part of 862. It is quite conceivable that the Battle of Dazimon and the incident of Michael took place at this time. Having attained to the rank of Caesar, Vard at this time ceded his command of the Palace cavalry to Petron, and as such, Petron assumed the general command of the Imperial armies during the 863 invasion of Poson.

In his eagerness to sting his victim once again, the insidious historian would have us believe that Vard appointed his young son Antigonos who was scarcely 8-10 as Domestik of the Scola's while he made Petron the latter's temporary lieutenant.<sup>3</sup> Petron became full fledged Domestik by Imperial order after the victory of 863.<sup>4</sup>

The fact is, however, Petron was Vard's direct successor as Domestik and after his victorious return from the invasion he was

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 94-97.

<sup>3</sup> Theoph. Contin., 179-180.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 183.

promoted to the rank of Magister.<sup>5</sup>

Before the war, according to one source, Petron was Strategos of Thrace, according to another source he was Strategos of Anatolia.<sup>6</sup> There is reason to believe that in 860 Petron was an important Palace functionary. In May of 859 Emperor Michael sent an old man named Adroupilis (Constantine Dripilios) as his Ambassador to the Arabs to negotiate the exchange of prisoners.<sup>7</sup> The Arabs sent to the capital an ambassador named Nasser with the same mission.

Nasser fulfilled his mission successfully after a stay of four months and the exchange of prisoners took place in March of 860. At that time Petron had a position in the Imperial Palace. Nasser calls him Michael's uncle. He also calls Michael's uncle the man who carried on the negotiations in the presence of the Emperor. Could it be that the latter was Vard himself? In view of the fact that Vard was Michael's most influential Minister at the Palace it is reasonable to presume that the man who carried on the negotiations was Vard whose name Nasser has left out, or he has confused with Petron since both men were Michael's uncles.

The role which is ascribed to Petron makes it permissible to suppose that he was still Domestik of the Scola's at the time of Nasser. In that case we are forced to conclude that Petron was appointed Domestik when Vard was promoted to the rank of Caesar which was about 857-858.

These apparently trivial details are not superfluous quibble. The office of the Domestik — commander of the Palace cavalry regiments which was the only regular imperial military force — was an exalted post which could be filled only by the most capable and leading military figures, and the fact that Petron was made Domestik

attests to his high rank in the Palace. And yet, not only the old chroniclers, but even modern writers have been reluctant to say a kind word in his memory, and if anything, they have endeavored to discount his achievements.

The famous victory of Poson in 863 was the work of Petron, and if he had accomplished nothing else, that alone would have sufficed to immortalize him. This was not an ordinary victory. Poson is a great historical phenomenon. After a long and fluctuating contest of rival powers this was the first time that Byzantine arms demonstrated its clear superiority in military might and the art of strategy. Petron trapped the Arab army and destroyed it in one blow. He destroyed three warlike Arab generals who for years had been the scourge of the Empire. Omar and Carpeas fell in the battle, while Ali Ibn Yaha was killed one month later at Nprgert (Mufarzin) by the Imperial soldiers.

Petron's victory wiped off the blot which had sullied the Byzantine name ever since the inglorious defeat of Amora, brought the Arab world to its senses, and insured the peace of the East for long years.<sup>8</sup> Petron returned to the capital in glory, taking with him the head of Omar, the lifeless symbol of his living victory. Malicious historians have passed silently over a royal reception which surely must have been accorded to him at the capital. Fortunately, there has been preserved one scrap of information which tells us of victory demonstrations held in the arena, and what is significant for its novelty, special songs were woven over the death of the mighty Arab Emir Omar.<sup>9</sup>

The Emperor honored the hero of the hour by raising Petron to the rank of Magister, the highest rank in the Empire next to Caesar.

With a record of greater services and in-

<sup>5</sup> *Genesius*, 95, 97.

<sup>6</sup> *Theoph. Cont.*, 179, *Georgius*, 825.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>8</sup> *Georgius*, 825.

comparably superior to Petron was his elder brother Vard who has been maligned by the historians with a viciousness which is in reverse ratio with his high achievements. These defamations are more in the nature of gossip rather than established charges, largely the result of personal venom.

As the guardian of the young Emperor and his first minister, Vard was the foremost and only responsible agent of the empire. Michael was emperor only in name, having neither the ability nor the desire to busy himself with governmental affairs. From early childhood he had surrendered himself to a life of pleasure, and if he had possessed any noble instincts, these had been stifled in his morbid and dissolute proclivities. Thus, having surrendered himself to his revelry and nocturnal orgies, he had left the fate of the empire to his uncle Vard in whom he had limitless confidence.

Vard, without doubt, was endowed with the qualities which his high position demanded. Even enemy pens testify to his high administrative abilities and his keen sense of justice. He had a reputation for incorruptibility. Proud with the consciousness of his powers and merits, he was intelligent enough not to trespass the bounds of discretion. He was Caesar, next in line of the Imperial succession, he knew what it meant to dazzle the public eye, and accordingly, he surrounded himself with a stately magnificence.

These traits have been catalogued by the historians, based, apparently, upon the testimony of impartial ancient sources. However, driven by certain motives, the historians have tried to disparage the character of Vard. Thus, after having emphasized his incorruptibility, one historian adds that this was but a false, artificial (*epiplastos*) incorruptibility, because, in reality, Vard was greedy and loved to acquire new estates and precious articles.

Vard's discretion, likewise, has been subjected to doubt. The historian thinks Vard was acting in pretending to be discreet, when in reality he was not.

As to his administrative ability, nothing more biting could be said than the historian's commentary that "it was lower than the best." The historians confess that Vard expended a great deal of labor and personal zeal on the empire's welfare, yet they minimize his glamor by hinting that he was working for himself, since he looked upon the empire as his personal property and which he would claim sooner or later.

Needless to say slings of this sort could not sully the luster of a name which had been established by the testimony of far more trustworthy and eloquent witnesses — his magnificent achievements which have been recorded by his very enemies. During his activity of ten years Vard directed the affairs of the empire (*ta politika*) and its fate with such competence and success that no one could utter a word of displeasure or protest.

His prolific activity in the field of education, unique in its kind, was worthy of praise and admiration. Having destroyed the pagan outlook, Christianity had not spared the pagan sciences. The Holy Bible had been declared the only source of wisdom and its authority had been acknowledged as a force which persecuted the finest products of the exploring mind — the trust of Hellenic wisdom. The Old Testament, of course, was far from being a repulsive book. It was a sort of repository in which were stored up the accumulated wisdom of the East. Nevertheless, mankind already had launched on the new Hellenic era which was far superior to all that had preceded. The Hellenic mind had made conquests in all the fields of science. The theories of the Old Testament had become obsolete in their primitive simplicity.

It was, of course, a reactionary step when

<sup>9</sup> Const. Porphyg. De Cerimon, I, 332.

Christianity, together with the living wine of the Gospel, forced upon mankind the leaden waters of the Dead Sea. From that day on Greek philosophy receded to the role of handmaiden to theology. The barren trees of theology grew up and flourished while the seeds of ancient philosophy dried away. For centuries the inquiring mind of man was chained to the slavery of religious superstitions.

The first signs of revolt against the supremacy of theology appeared in the Ninth century and the pioneers of the revolt were the Armenians, their greatest exponent being Leo the great philosopher. Vard himself was an educated man with an acute appreciation of the classics. Seeing the newly-sprouting offshoots of the old and buried sciences he determined to take them under the government's care. To this end he founded the first institution of higher education, the first university in Byzantium which was located at the old palace of Magnavra. He invited Leo the great scientist to head the new institution.

Leo (Levon) was an Armenian and nephew of the Patriarch Hovhannes (832-843). Patriarch Hovhannes and his brother Arshavir the Patrician were likewise educated men. Leo himself was renowned for his great erudition. He was not only an expert in philosophy, rhetoric, poetry and grammar, but he was first to turn his attention on the forgotten natural sciences. He had won such proficiency in geometry, astronomy, mathematics, and even music that had become a professor and later was invited to become lecturer at the Magnavra University. Leo owed much to his erudite uncle Patriarch Hovhannes who, like his father Bagarat (Bagrat) was a great lover of science, especially astronomy.

It of course must have been due to the influence of Hovhannes that Leo entered the ranks of the clergy and was Bishop of Thessalonica for nearly three years (840-

843). However, after the downfall of his uncle, he was forced to relinquish his pastorate as well as his clerical calling for which he had no strong attachment to begin with and to return to his professorship. Soon after, he took up his professorship at the University of Magnavra.

Leo's activity was highly fruitful. Soon he turned out a number of distinguished pupils some of whom he enlisted as instructors at the university, such as, Theodore the geometrician, Theotekios the astronomer and Gomidas the grammarian. Another pupil of Leo was Constantine who later became missionary of the Slavs under the name of Cyril.

With a laudable paternalism, Vard insured the economic security of the university professors by making them pensioners of the government so that they could give their full time and attention to their work, completely free of the harrassment from material want. So close was the new institution to his heart that he often visited the classes, followed the progress of the students and spurred them to greater efforts with promises of future positions. In this manner Vard succeeded in creating a wonderful garden of knowledge which grew and flourished, fully justifying the hopes of its planter. The University of Magnavra is an irrefutable monument to the genius of Vard Mamikonian.

The historians have admitted reluctantly the merits of Vard as a patron of the sciences, adding the while that this service was not enough to make us ignore his misdeeds. The reference chiefly belongs to his ecclesiastical policy. The ancient chroniclers are fierce enemies of Vard and his policies. In their opinion Vard was the cause of the feuds which disturbed the life of the church for almost ten years (859-869). They would have us believe that his policies were motivated by his personal feud with Patriarch Ignatius. However, the

question goes much deeper than that and the historians are inspired by narrow partisanship.

Patriarch Hovhannes the Armenian was dethroned in 843 as a result of the restoration of iconoduly. He was succeeded by Methodius who lasted for four years. In 847 there were three candidates for the patriarchal throne, all three of royal origin: Ignatius, son of Michael Rangape, and the two sons of Leo the Armenian, Basil and Grigor. Ignatius was the winner, not so much because he was the most worthy of the three but because he was supported by Theoctist the Eunuch who was Empress Theodora's most powerful minister. It was not to Theoctist's interest to push forward the Armenians. Outwardly, he could hide his choice with the pious looking pretext that Basil and Grigor were undesirables to the succession of the patriarchal throne because they were the sons of iconoclasts at a time when iconoduly was victorious. Theoctist himself was the author of the iconodulist policy and it was he who had selected and patronized Ignatius.

Vard, as a political antagonist of Theoctist, naturally could not be a friend of his satellites, including Ignatius the Patriarch. After the overthrow of the eunuch it was natural that the Patriarch's position would likewise be shaken.

Ignatius was a devout clergyman who possessed neither a deep mind nor a sharp eye. Instead of sensing his precarious position and making his moves accordingly, he was sufficiently incircumspect to cause his own downfall and the ensuing turbulence.

What was the thing which precipitated the clash between Vard and Ignatius? The old timers have related and the new historians have reiterated it without a critical examination two events, one of which comes closer to a slander rather than the truth.

Vard had two sons and one daughter. The elder son, whose name has been ig-

nored by history, was appointed monostateg, i.e., Strategos of several themes of the east. An Armenian general named Vardan had been Strategos of these themes once upon a time. The younger son, called Antigone, had been appointed Domestik of the Scola's when he was still an infant, namely, commander of the Palace cavalry. The daughter's name was Irene who was married to Sumbat the Armenian Prince who, after the assassination of Theoctist, had taken over the office of Logothete. Irene's tomb is located at the Monastery of Castria, the burying place of her uncle Petron, and her aunt Empress Theodora with her three daughters.<sup>10</sup>

Sinister news made the rounds in the capital that Vard the Caesar was cohabiting with the wife of his eldest son. Advised of the circulating gossip, Ignatius lost no time in summoning Vard and admonishing him to put a stop to his illicit relationship. Vard was not accustomed to being insulted and the irate Patriarch took a decisive step. On the great holiday of the Revelation (Christmas) as Caesar approached the altar to partake of the holy communion, the Patriarch insulted him by refusing to administer the communion. Infuriated by the churchman's frivolous and indiscreet behavior, Vard drew his great sword and for a moment meant to bring the haughty Patriarch back to his senses, but he thought better of it and controlled his fury. From that moment he made up his mind to dethrone the Patriarch.

This incident is recorded by all the historians.<sup>11</sup> Only one of them asserts that Vard separated from his wife and married his daughter-in-law, scorning the church law.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to us the real source of this

<sup>10</sup> Constantin Porphyrogenetes, *De Cerimoniis*, I, 648.

<sup>11</sup> Genes., 99; Georg. 826; Leo Gram. 240; Symeon, 667.

<sup>12</sup> Theoph. Cont., 193.



story is "The Life of Ignatius" by Nicedas the Paphlagonian.<sup>13</sup> It is a question if such a serious charge deserves credence, especially when it emanates from an enemy source. And who was this young wife of Vard's eldest son?

In her search for a bride for her son Michael, Empress Theodora had resorted to the same means which had brought about her own marriage. From all corners of the empire she had brought to the Palace young candidates and from among them she had chosen a girl named Eudocia, the daughter of one Decapolit. Among the candidates were two Cappadocean girls, sisters, one of whose name was Irene while the name of the other is not known. Upon their arrival at the capital the two sisters had called on Hovhannik the hermit on Mount Olympus, to beg his benediction on their success. Hovhannik had alarmed Irene by predicting for her the black garment of the convent nun instead of the imperial purple. As a matter of fact Irene was not selected and she entered the Monastery of Chrisopolant (The Golden Sack) near the basin of Asbar, not far from the home of Manuel Mamikonian.

And what happened to her sister? From "The Life of Irene" we learn that her sister "later married Michael's uncle, Vard the Caesar."<sup>14</sup>

Vard must have become acquainted with Irene's sister the year Michael was married which took place shortly before the assassination of Theoctist in 856. This places Michael's marriage at 855 when he was a youth of 16-17. But at that time Vard already had a daughter who had come of age, and two sons the younger of whom was 9-10 year old. His daughter was married to Prince Sumbat. It is plain that Irene's sister could not have been Vard's first wife. She was his second wife. According to the preceding testimony, Vard

had separated from his first wife and had married "his son's wife." This girl could have been none other than Irene's sister, namely, the sister of Vard's son's wife.

"The Life of Irene" is free of the influence of the Ignatiusian literature and consequently its testimony is highly valuable. In this work there is not a single hint as to taint of Vard's marriage. There is not even any mention of Irene's sister being Vard's daughter in law. This fact puts the knife to the slander of the opposite camp.

Of the two sons of Vard only the eldest could have been the bridegroom, since the younger was still a child. The marriage must have taken place not earlier than 855 when Irene and her sister came to the capital as candidates of the imperial marriage. In later years we find Vard's eldest son as an officer in the west where he died before 862. It must be presumed that, if he was married, he must have taken his wife with him.

The unsavory gossip about Vard circulated before January the 6th, 858 when his daughter-in-law was a bride of scarcely two years and perhaps even less. If her husband was sent to the west following the death of Theoctist, she must have accompanied him during the years of 856 and 857. But if they went to the west after 858, it is difficult to imagine that Vard would carry on an illicit love with his daughter-in-law in the presence of his son.

This malicious gossip was probably based on the supposition that Vard took advantage of his son's absence to carry on illicit relations with his wife. One thing is certain, Vard married his "daughter-in-law" or her sister after the death of his son. This is the origin of the gossip which could not possibly have any connection with the fall of Ignatius which took place in 858, whereas Vard's marriage probably took place a little before 862, the year he became Caesar.

Speaking for Ignatius, one of his minions

<sup>13</sup> Vita Ignati, Migne, P.G. 105, col. 504.

<sup>14</sup> Acta Sanctorum, Iulius, 28, Vol. VI, 602.

had lodged a complaint with the Pope of Rome against Vard but the complaint did not have a word about the alleged illicit love. The cause of the Patriarch's downfall, it was generally admitted, was the fact that he had refused to cut off the hair of Theodora and her daughters as Vard had ordered.<sup>15</sup>

This argument is, likewise, devoid of truth. Theodora fell in 856 and was removed from the Palace at least 18 months later as we have seen above. Therefore she must have been at the convent by the middle of 857, whereas the Patriarch was dethroned in November of 858. The distance between the two events is too wide to admit of causal connection.

It seems to us that the legend of Vard's illicit love and the matter of cutting off Theodora's hair were deliberately invented in order to conceal the real cause of the break between Vard and the Patriarch. Even if they were founded on facts, they are too trivial to have any bearing on political events of such magnitude as to disturb the peace of the empire. Neither the Byzantine court could conscientiously boast of a pure moral code nor the Patriarch was such a sensitive puritan in his moral standard to dare pit himself against the most powerful minister of the empire and thus to jeopardize his position.

Vard's grudge and hatred of Ignatius can be explained only when we suppose that the Patriarch was a part of the conspiracy which was plotted against Vard. We know that the dethroned Theodora was the spirit of the conspiracy, determined to regain the throne at the cost of her brother's life. The Patriarch was a close friend of Theodora and Theoctist who had elected him to the patriarchal throne. The assassination of Theoctist and the removal of Theodora

from the Palace had embittered the Patriarch against Vard.

The example of the mentally deranged Gebeon clearly shows that Ignatius was not indifferent to the conspiratorial plottings which were designed to overthrow Vard, and the latter, of course, had good reason to call the Patriarch Gevovasileus, i.e., a man who aspires to Gebeon's kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

The fellow called Gebeon had come to the capital from the city of Tirakium in Illyria (modern Albania), claiming he was the son of Empress Theodora before her marriage to Emperor Theophilus. This was a disturbing claim, fraught with explosive possibilities. Vard's enemies made the most of it to promote discontent among the people and to discredit Vard's government. The troublesome maniac was caught and sentenced to death. The same day Patriarch Ignatius was removed from his throne. This happened in November of 858.

If at the beginning of this year the Patriarch had really insulted Vard by refusing him the holy communion, or had disobeyed him in shearing off Theodora's hair, both the insult and the disobedience would hardly have sufficed to provoke his downfall.

To replace Ignatius, Vard proposed a secular candidate named Photius, the most learned and the most enlightened mind of his age and a highly cultured and pleasing personality. At this time Photius was a *protopatar* (soldier) and *proto-asecret* (first secretary). Photius was Vard's favorite as a learned man. Besides, he was the son of Irene, the sister of Arshavir the Patrician, while Arshavir was Vard's brother-in-law, the husband of his sister Galo-Maria.

One month after the downfall of Ignatius, on Christmas day of December 25, 858, Photius ascended the patriarchal throne, having been promoted to the clergy ranks within a few days. Ignatius refused to

<sup>15</sup> Theognostus, *Libellus ad Papam*, Migne, P. 105, col. 857.

<sup>16</sup> Vita Ignatii, Migne, P.G. 105, col. 504.

ordain Photius bishop. They appealed to a bishop named Grigor Asbest who was a mortal foe of Ignatius, and he performed the ordination. This step further infuriated the offended Patriarch.

Grigor Asbest was the Bishop of Sicily who, as a result of some sort of negligence of duty, had been summoned to the capital to clear himself. One day, in the Cathedral of St. Sophia, when the ecclesiastics were lined up with lit candles, waiting on the Patriarch, Ignatius, seeing Grigor among them, was greatly incensed and ordered him to leave the place and never show his face again until his case was examined. Deeply hurt, Bishop Grigor extinguished his candle, and dropping it to the floor, exclaimed in a loud voice: "This man is not a shepherd of the flock who has entered the church; he is a wolf."

The clergy was now divided into two camps, the supporters of Ignatius, and the followers of Grigor. The power lay with the former because this event took place during the reign of Theodora and Theoctist, the supporters of Ignatius. These appealed to the intervention of the Pope, and when the Pope demanded the records of the meeting Ignatius refused to comply. Among the sympathizers of Grigor was Photius, at this time still a layman, who had a profound respect for Grigor's erudition and an equal degree of contempt for Ignatius' ignorance.

Vard took sides with Grigor and Photius as against Ignatius, Theodora and Theoctist. Partisan passions were now centered around the church, dividing the empire into two opposing political camps.

Grigor's case was not yet settled while partisan passions were riding high. The appearance of an unfrocked bishop in an honorable role, the ordination of a layman to the rank of bishop in a few days, and his installment as Patriarch were too much for the followers of Ignatius to stomach.

The year following the election of Pho-

tius, Ignatius called a council of his partisans. The meeting passed a resolution to remove Photius from the patriarchal throne. The same year Photius called a council of his own and issued a similar decree about Ignatius.

The religious fights, naturally, were being waged on the political arena. Ignatius was supported by Theodora and Theoctist; Photius was supported by Vard. Upon the verdict of Photius' council, Vard banished Ignatius.

The issue was further complicated when the congregation of the famous monastery of Stution took sides with Ignatius, and became hopeless with the intervention of Rome. The Stutionites were defending the principle of the church's freedom against the tyranny of the government. The Pope of Rome was trying to profit by fishing in stormy waters. At that time the Papal throne was occupied by Nicolaius I, an ambitious man who dreamt of world domination and who thought the time was ripe to bring the Byzantine church within the Papal fold.

The accession of the new Patriarch, according to the accepted custom, was announced to the patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem, as well as to the Pope of Rome. Arshavir Spatar (presumably a relative of Vard or Photius), accompanied by three bishops, appeared before the Pope in the summer of 860 and presented to him Emperor Michael's and Photius' letters. In reply, the Pope sent to bishops to Constantinople to study the situation at first hand and report to him. Meanwhile, in his letter to Michael, the Pope gave him to understand that, to settle the matter to his wish, he should cede to him the themes of Thessalonika, Calabria and Sicily.

The following year (861), in the Month of May, a council was held in Constantinople with the participation of the Pope's

nuncios and 318 bishops. An Armenian functionary named Vahan Angores was sent to Ignatius to invite him to the council.<sup>17</sup> The Patrician Hovhannes, called Gokses, bought over Patrician Leo, the President of the Senate, and Patrician Theodotak who later was promoted to the rank of Magister. In all probability Theodotak was an Armenian by descent, judging by the form of his name which ends in an Armenian suffix rather than Greek. Seventy two of the delegates bore testimony that Ignatius had been elected, not according to the church law, but through the pressure of Empress Theodora as her protege.

Incidentally, the preceding testimony confirms our theory that Ignatius was the candidate of the Empress and Theoctist as against Leo the Fifth's sons Basil and Grigor.

The council came to the conclusion that Ignatius was unworthy of the patriarchal throne and that his removal was just. The Pope's nuncios conformed to the decision. The Pope himself was dissatisfied with the verdict. We have already seen that the controversy itself did not interest the Pope. He was primarily interested in recovering the themes which Leo the Isaurian had wrested from the Papal jurisdiction. His terms having been rejected, the Pope sent encyclicals to the eastern patriarchs expressing his indignation against Photius, calling him a malefactor, and demanding his resignation and the restoration of Ignatius.

Just about that time one of Ignatius' close friends named Theocnost went to see the Pope, taking with him a letter from Ignatius. The Pope called a council in 863 in the Lateran church. The revelations of Theocnost were made the pretext for demanding the resignation of Photius in favor of Ignatius. Photius retaliated by calling a council of his own in 865 and by treating

the Pope in the same manner. The division of the church was now complete. Matters went so far that the Emperor, viz Vard, threatened the Pope to force him to obedience by armed force.

With the assassination of Vard on April 21, 866 the fortunes of Photius underwent a complete reversal.

Vard's star started to fade from the day he overthrew his old friend Damianos. Damianos was Vard's chamberlain (Parakimomen) and he was displeased with his master, apparently because, having attained to a high rank, he had done nothing for his old friend.

One day as Vard, dressed in his resplendent attire and accompanied by a retinue of senators and Palace dignitaries, was passing through the Horologion (The Hall with the sun dial) on his way to the Golden Hall (Khrisotriklinon) to call on the Emperor, Damianos refused to accord Vard the customary homage of rising to his feet. Pale with rage, Vard went to the Emperor and complained to him about the insult to his person. Justifying his beloved uncle's complaint, Michael immediately ordered Damianos sent to the Monastery, having first shorn off his hair. With the assent of the Emperor, Damianos was replaced by Basil the Armenian as chamberlain.<sup>18</sup>

It should be observed that the incident of Damianos does not inspire great credence. Damianos is at first represented as Vard's benefactor. It was he who, apparently, reconciled Vard with Michael, and it seems Vard's ingratitude was deliberately invented to account for Damianos' sad ending. In all probability Damianos' alleged service is also a pure invention.

The office of chamberlain was generally bestowed on the eunuchs, however Michael made an exception in the case of Basil who was gradually gaining power in the Palace. Vard had good reason to resent this ar-

<sup>17</sup> Vita Ignatii, Migne, P.G. 105, col. 577.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Gram. 241; Georg. 828.

rangement since Basil undoubtedly was far more dangerous than the pitiful eunuch Damianos. Vard, consequently, was credited with the saying: "They removed the fox and replaced him with a lion who is destined to swallow us all."<sup>19</sup>

Now the arena was occupied by two formidable rivals: Vard and Basil, two distinguished Armenians. The Emperor, apparently, was the only power which could tip the scales in favor of one or the other.

Vard watched with apprehension how Basil won the affections of the Emperor's mistress Eudocia and his sister Tecla. This was quite an achievement. Basil became an intimate friend of the Emperor and was a boon companion in his revelries. He went so far as to speak against the Emperor's uncle Vard. He planted the seeds of suspicion in his heart that Caesar was not such a reliable person and that his ambitious instinct superceded his sense of loyalty. Michael, who was accustomed to the Palace gossip, at first paid no heed to Basil. It would be indiscreet of him cut off his uncle once and forever, the very man who had rendered him such services.

Basil tried to undermine the faith of Michael through other and more reliable interventionists. He cunningly won over the Logothete Sumbat who was the husband of Vard's daughter Irene and probably a scion of the Bagratids, judging from the name. Basil undermined Sumbat with illusive promises, making him believe that, if Vard were removed, he would take his place. He prodded him to whisper in the Emperor's ear that Vard was a menace to his life and his rule. Presumably the son-in-law's word against his father-in-law would have greater weight with the Emperor than Basil's insidious whisperings. Finally Michael gave in. The fate of Vard was decided. All they had to do now was to wait for the opportune moment.

To the ancients the role of providence was a historic factor which often forewarned the future with various signs, such as, visions, dreams and the appearance of comets. The historians have dug up similar signs in regard to the downfall of Vard.

Emperor Michael had planned to march against the Arabs of the Island of Crete accompanied by Vard. The Imperial army arrived at a place called Kepi (Gardens) in the plain of the Meneander River in Thrace. Vard was personally opposed to camping the army here, no doubt, having his suspicions. Providence already had saturated his mind with various signs. Once he dreamed he was entering the Cathedral of St. Sophia together with the Emperor. As they entered inside, Vard saw two illuminated figures, presumably angels. Farther on, he saw an old man seated on the Patriarchal throne. The old man was the Apostle Peter. Kneeling before him was the Patriarch Ignatius, imploring him to punish the wrongs which Vard had done him. The Apostle promised to do so, called to his side one of the angels and said to him: "Go, kill the man who is standing to the left, and do the same to the man on the right." The first victim was Vard, the second was Michael.

There was another miracle. Before marching to the battle Vard went to the Monastery of Our Lady which was called Hodik (Oughevorats). When, candle in hand, he was praying, suddenly his cape slipped from his shoulders and fell to the ground. Terrified by the evil omen, Vard tearfully beseeched the Holy Virgin to frustrate the evil and save him from the impending danger.

It is also related that Empress Theodora, who still was alive, sent Vard a mysterious gift at the camp of Kepi. This was a lovely but short garment with the image of a partridge embroidered in gold. The strange gift surprised Vard who could not under-

<sup>19</sup> Theoph. Cont. 235.

stand why the garment was short, and what the partridge meant. He was distressed to learn that the bird was a symbol of conspiracy, reminding him of her revenge for the death of Theoctist, while the shortness of the garment meant his days were numbered. Apparently neither the years nor the peace of the convent had diminished the woman's vengeance.

In the church of St. Anna, called Devderon (The Second), there was a bust placed on a pillar. During an earthquake the bust had fallen down. According to the legend, Leo the Philosopher saw in this the fall of Vard. The man who was the "second" after the Emperor would be destroyed. The man who was second to the Emperor was Vard the Caesar. At the same time the philosopher had predicted that Basil would be his successor.

Such ominous phenomena were not cheering to Vard. On the eve of the invasion he staged a banquet in honor of his close friends, as if sensing that this would be his last. He distributed gifts to all of them and begged them to remember his memory. This was the last supper.

These legends were collected by Basil's grandson Constantine Porphyrogenetes who has preserved them in the story of his grandfather and were edited by Genesius the historian — rumors which have absolutely no historical value.<sup>20</sup>

Vard's dream is taken from "The Life of Ignatius."<sup>21</sup>

The rumors are calculated to place the blame of Vard's assassination on Providence in extenuation of the real criminal Basil. With the same intention they have distorted the scene of the crime. According to them, Vard was hated by the court. In becoming Caesar he had turned arrogant and had looked down on both the Emperor and

the Palace dignitaries. His only concern was to satisfy his boundless ambition. When the Imperial army arrived at Kepi, Michael's tent was pitched in the open plain, Vard selected the neighboring hill for his tent.

The conspirators went to work. Their lead-deliberate, sharpened the malicious tongues of his enemies. They gave the Emperor to understand that it was not for nothing Vard had chosen the heights for his quarters. That Caesar secretly planned to fall upon him and destroy him. Michael swallowed the cabal hook, line and sinker.

The conspirators went to work. Their leader was Sumbat, Vard's son-in-law. First they staged a horse race, thus detracting the attention of Vard's son Antigone. Antigone was the commander of the Imperial cavalry. Sumbat then entered the Emperor's tent, presumably to hold a conference, just when Vard was attending on the Emperor. After making his report to the Emperor, he signalled to the conspirators by crossing himself, as had been agreed upon. The conspirators instantly rushed inside from their hiding places and cut Vard to pieces in sight of the Emperor. One of the assassins was a man named Tzibinarit from the land of the Khaldis.<sup>22</sup> Here, not only Basil had no part in the assassination, but his name is not even mentioned. The narrator's caution is highly significant.

Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetes does not go that far. He admits Basil's guilt, yet he colors it. The real author of the conspiracy was Michael. When the talebearers poisoned his mind that Vard was about to kill him, Michael decided his fate. However he did not dare to act openly, fearing the power of the Caesar. Vard was his equal and the army was under his command. Antigone, the Domestik of the scholas was ready to defend his father. So, Michael resorted to conspiracy. He assembled Caesar's enemies among whom was Sumbat. When

<sup>20</sup> Genes. 103-105; Const. Porphy. *Vita Basilii*; Theoph. Contin., 203-207.

<sup>21</sup> Migne, P.G. 105, col. 533-536.

<sup>22</sup> Genes, 105-106.

the latter called on him in his capacity as Logothet to make his report, the Emperor gave the agreed signal and the conspirators rushed inside. Sumbat fulfilled the Emperor's command, but the conspirators did not dare to take the first step. On the other hand, delaying was highly dangerous. Vard might suspect the plot and when this happened there was no salvation for the Emperor. He would be the first to fall. The panic was about to break when Michael thought fit to call on the aid of Basil. When he heard the Emperor's life was in danger, Basil suddenly appeared on the scene, encouraged the conspirators, and they fell upon Vard. They hacked him to pieces with their swords at the foot of Michael.<sup>23</sup>

This account, likewise, is biased. Basil raised his sword not to commit murder, but presumably to do his duty to the Emperor.

The real truth must be sought among the writings of Vard's enemies. What had happened was a common political murder, a cold murder, devoid of any sense of duty or the frippery of sublime sentiments. The man who plotted against the life of the Caesar was Basil himself, his great champion. Not daring to raise his hand against him in the capital, no doubt fearing his power, Basil had advised the Emperor to come out of the city under the pretext of an invasion.

As it appears, the real motive of this invasion was no secret in certain circles in the capital. Vard's personal friend Leo the Philosopher was opposed to his friend joining the invasion and tried to stop him, saying, "The man who goes will never return alive." Vard's other friend Patriarch Photius also sensed the danger which threatened his patron and friend.

It is also related that a short time before the invasion, on the Christian holiday

of the Annunciation, March 25, after the church ritual, the Patriarch called the Emperor, Basil and Vard to the altar. He took out the chalice of the holy communion. The Emperor and Basil dipped their crosses in the holy blood and swore that Vard could accompany the invasion without fear.

Vard was neither frivolous nor gullible. If he did not heed his great friend's advice, it was because he had great faith in his nephew the Emperor. Michael owed much to his uncle.

That year the Easter fell on April 7. After the celebrations in the capital the Imperial army immediately set out for the wars. The army arrived and camped at Kepi. Here Basil decided to make an end of Vard. He organized his plot and the names of all the conspirators have been preserved. They all were Armenians.

A man named Hovhannes Neatocomit had wind of the peril which hung over Vard's head. In the evening, after sunset, he went to Caesar's tent and confided in Vard's Procop, Keeper of the Imperial wardrobe: "Tomorrow they will cut to pieces your master Vard."

The Procop divulged the ominous news to his master but the latter was untouched. "Go tell Neatocomit that he is raving. Let him know that he is still too young to become a Patrician. No doubt he is sowing his tares driven by his ambition to become Patrician."

All the same, Caesar was uneasy. His answer was not convincing. Could it be that the bearer of bad news was right? That night he could not sleep a wink. His soul was troubled. Before dawn he summoned his aides, told them the news and asked their advice. His old friend Philotes who was Protosbatar and Carnikle of the Empire (Keeper of the Treasury) said to him scornfully: "My Lord, tomorrow put on your gold-embroidered cloak and show

<sup>23</sup> Vita Basilii — Theoph. Cont., 235-338.

yourself to your enemies. The sight of you will scare them away."

At sunrise Vard left his tent, headed for the Emperor's quarters. Mounted on his stallion, in his resplendent regalia and accompanied by his retinue of aides, Caesar approached the Emperor's tent. Constantin Toksar, one of the conspirators, met the Caesar and hurried to inform Basil of his arrival. Basil met him and holding him by the hand led him to the Emperor. Vard ensconced himself beside the Emperor then said: "The soldiers are ready, my Lord, give the command and they will embark for Crete."

Basil was standing behind Vard. Suddenly Vard turned around and his gaze fell upon Basil who was frowning. In a flash Basil's sword was drawn, the conspirators rushed forward and hacked the poor prince to pieces. Michael watched the butchery in silence. The hour was three (9 A.M. by our time), April 21, 866.

Basil was not alone. He was surrounded by his accomplices all of whom were Armenians. Fortunately, all their names have been preserved. First, there was Basil's brother Marion (or Mavrian), then Sumbat, Vard's son-in-law, one Acila who sometimes was called Sumbat's nephew and sometimes Basil's nephew, and then Vard, the brother of Sumbat.<sup>24</sup> Others mentioned are: Bedros Bulgar, his cousin Leo the Assyrian, Hovhannes Khald and Constantin Toksar.

The appellations "Bulgar", "Assyrian," and "Khald" do not denote national origin but are nicknames. Otherwise Bulgar's (Bedros) cousin could not have been called "Assyrian." Apparently Hovhannes is the same person whom we have seen as Tzibinarid (could it be Tzibinartzi, a native of Tzibinar?) Tzibinar, and probably Toksar, are names of places, probably in the land of

the Khaldis. All these persons are Armenians, despite their misleading names.

Following the assassination the Emperor wrote a letter to Photius at the capital, explaining to him that Vard had been killed for his criminal intentions. Photius' answer has come down to us. The Patriarch is very cautious. Vard's loss was a great blow to him because not only he had been his staunch friend, but his principal supporter in the ecclesiastical controversies. It was difficult to deplore his death without jeopardizing his position at the Palace. He expressed surprise that Vard, who was almost the emperor without the title, should have been so indiscreet as to raise his hand against his master. Meanwhile he did not conceal his doubts of the Emperor's letter was not a forgery, or if the fact had been accurately presented.

Worthy of notice is, especially, the Patriarch's exhortation that the Emperor return to the capital at once. Not only the Senate, but the people of the capital without exception were anxious to see the Emperor as soon as possible.<sup>25</sup>

The Patriarch was farsighted and he was afraid that the Emperor would be the next to fall victim of Basil's ambition. The Emperor set out for the capital. On his way, at the seaport of Acritas, a huge throng turned out to meet him. Suddenly a monk who was perched on a ridge shouted loudly: "You have made a successful invasion, O Emperor. You have killed your own uncle who was like a father to you. You have killed him. Woe unto you, woe unto you that you should have behaved in this manner."

Angered, the Emperor ordered his page Mavrotheodore to go cut off the head of the insolent monk but the crowd intervened and saved the life of the poor man, arguing that he was a lunatic.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Symeon, 678; Georg. 830, call him Sumbat's cousin; Georg. 837; Simeon, 688, call him Basil's cousin.

<sup>25</sup> Migne, P.G. 102, col. 717-719.

<sup>26</sup> Georg., 831; Symeon, 679.



If the truth is spoken by the mouth of babes, the voice of conscience, it seems, is heard by the madmen. The public sympathy, it seems, was on the side of Vard. This was the reason why the conspirators did not dare to act in the city but lured their victim elsewhere by staging a theatrical invasion. The capital had lost its capacity for righteous indignation. The political podium had long since been converted into an arena where the change of the actors served to entertain the people. The ignorant multitude always bowed its head before the conqueror.

The apprehensions of Photius were well founded. The very next year, on September 24, 867, Michael was the next to fall by Basil's sword.

After the death of Vard the Emperor retained the ecclesiastical status quo where the great Caesar had left it. The ecclesiastical council of 867 excommunicated the Pope, blaming him for his ambitious stand toward the Byzantine church. When Basil ascended the throne he thought it wise to follow a peaceful policy and not to sever his friendly relations with the West. The Eighth Ecumenical Council, held in 869, put an end to the church controversy by

eliminating Photius and restoring Ignatius to the Patriarchal throne.

Western historians, old and modern, have taken a negative attitude toward Vard's church policy, motivated by their understanding of the interests of the Latin church. The Byzantine view is different. Byzantium welcomed every effort or venture which aimed to repel the Papal encroachments and to defend the freedom and the independence of the Byzantine church. Subsequent history has supported Vard's stand. Basil merely retarded that which eventually would triumph. The ecclesiastical schism of 1042 was nothing but the culmination of Vard's and Photius' policies.

Basilian historians and church chroniclers have spared no effort to blacken Vard's name. Whereas, his two accomplishments — popular enlightenment and spiritual freedom — are enough to win for him an honorable place in history. Without question he was a great statesman. He was a man who was destined to lay the foundation of a new dynasty and who fell victim of perfidy. The son of the Mamikonians fell ingloriously when he should have closed his eyes in his peaceful bed.